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CODRUS'S CHIRON AND A PAINTING FROM HERCULANEUM

IN his third satire Juvenal presents a kaleidoscopic picture of the disadvantages of life in Rome. The dramatic setting is simple. The poet's friend Umbricius, an upright man of slender means, finding the struggle for existence too hard in the metropolis, has resolved to leave the city once for all and to take up his abode in half-deserted Cumae. His goods are packed upon a single wagon, and he stands beside the spring of Egeria, near the beginning of the Appian Way over which his journey lies; there he pours into the ear of the poet, who has accompanied him thus far for leave-taking, the burden of his complaint, setting forth the reasons why there is in Rome no place for a man who is not rich, and who wishes to make an honest living. He does not indulge in moralizing, no words are wasted in bitter inveighing; instead, there is rapidly passed before the mind's eye a succession of situations, portrayed humorously in part, yet with remarkable conciseness and with a concreteness of imagery that stamps them upon the mind of the reader.

In one of these scenes is pictured the lot of the hapless fellow of refined tastes whom poverty condemns to live in an attic. Up under the roof, with only a thickness of tile between himself and the rain, he lives not only in discomfort but in danger from fire, which, starting in the lower stories of the jerry-built tenement may at any moment mount to his narrow quarters and consume the wretched furniture of the tenant if not the tenant himself. An example is Codrus. Says the poet:

"Codrus had a couch too small for Procula. He had six tiny pitchers, the adornment of his sideboard; yes, and underneath, a small drinking-cup, and lying under the same slab of

marble, a Chiron; and further an old basket was storing his Greek books, and Philistine mice were nibbling god-like poems. Codrus had nothing; who indeed would assert the contrary? And yet, poor wretch, that entire nothing he lost. And 'tis the very climax of his woe that though he is naked and begging for scraps, nobody will come to his rescue with food, nobody with friendly shelter."¹

There follows, by contrast, the situation which presents itself when the house of the rich man burns. Then the city mourns, and while the house is still burning wealthy friends commence bringing gifts of money, slabs of marble to use in rebuilding, and works of art, in such profusion that the loss may be more than made up.

The comment of the scholiast, that Codrus was a poverty-stricken poet, coupled with the hint that he is the same as the author of the interminable Theseid of the first Satire, has the earmarks of a late origin, and is no safe guide in interpretation; in the best manuscript, moreover, the author of the Theseid is given as Cordus. Neither is our Codrus to be confused with the poetaster immortalized by Virgil in the fifth and seventh Eclogues. That our Codrus, however, was not merely a type but an actual person whose story, under that name or some other, was well known to Juvenal's contemporaries is, I think, far from improbable. He may have been a poet who composed Greek verses, or merely an unfortunate man of bookish tastes; the touch of the satirist would seem more obvious if we suppose that the "god-like poems" were Codrus's own.² Be that as it may, though we cannot restore

¹ Lectus erat Codro Procula minor, urceoli sex
ornamentum abaci nec non et parvulus infra
cantharus, et recubans sub eodem marmore Chiro,
iamque vetus Graecos servabat cista libellos,
et divina opici rodebant carmina mures.
Nil habuit Codrus, quis enim negat? et tamen illud
perdidit infelix totum nihil. Ultimus autem
aerumnae est cumulus, quod nudum et frusta rogantem
nemo cibo, nemo hospitio tectoque iuvabit.

Procula was apparently a well-known dwarf. The idea is about the same as if we should have said "too small for Mrs. Tom Thumb," while that diminutive lady was still living.

² The use of *libellos* suggests "small books" of poetry.

the personality, we can reconstruct the setting in which Codrus is presented and which gives us a glimpse of the life of an ancient "Latin Quarter."

Of the couch in Codrus's cramped lodging it is not necessary to speak, nor of the round wicker basket in which, too poor to afford any longer a book box, or *capsa*, he kept his precious volumes; the wickerwork, worn with use, afforded slight protection against the mice, which were attracted by the papyrus of the rolls.

Straitened as he was, like many a man of ideals under similar circumstances, Codrus in his poverty still clung to some poor articles of taste. For their display he had a small sideboard, or stand, the top of which was formed by a rectangular slab of marble. This was a remote imitation of the elaborate abacus in homes of wealth — unsculptured marble of the ordinary sort was relatively inexpensive; and upon the top of the stand instead of vessels of gold and silver, or precious bronzes, were a half-dozen small common pitchers. Under the marble top, supported by a shelf or base or resting on the floor, were the two-handled "drinking-cup" (*cantharus*) and the Chiron.

Four explanations of the Chiron have been proposed that are worthy of notice.¹ The first is that it is the name of a dog. This explanation, though accepted by so careful a scholar as Otto Jahn, may unhesitatingly be rejected; Chiron clearly belongs in the enumeration of inanimate objects that make up Codrus's art collection. Even less plausible is the interpretation suggested by Buecheler, who in his revision of Jahn's edition of Juvenal omitted the comma after *Chiro*, connecting this closely with *cista*; in his view a figure of the centaur served both as ornament and as a handle for the cover of the receptacle in which the books were kept. Many commentators have thought of the Chiron as carved in marble to form the support (*trapezophoron*) for the marble top of the sideboard, an explanation adopted also by Friedlaender in the earlier editions of his *Sittengeschichte Roms*; but with such an interpretation the participial adjective *recubans*, if taken literally, seems irrecon-

¹ The conjecture *sub marmore echinus* was adequately treated by Heinrich in his edition of Juvenal, vol. II, p. 156. Housman has *recubans sub eodem e marmore Chiron*.

cilable.¹ Finally Mayor and a few other editors, including Friedlaender,² explain the Chiron as a separate figure. This is alone consistent with the requirements of the text; for the cantharus and the Chiron are both in the same category,³ and if the poet had conceived of the latter as other than a separate object he must have chosen a different form of expression. The small cantharus, moreover, would hardly have been conceived as standing on the floor, on account of the danger of marring or breaking it; we may reasonably conclude therefore that Juvenal pictured in his mind an abacus with supports at the ends or corners and a shelf between, or a ledge of some sort at the bottom which raised the cantharus and the Chiron above the floor.⁴

If the Chiron was a piece of sculpture, it could hardly have been thought of as an original, for two reasons: first, the presence of an object of art of intrinsic value in Codrus's quarters would have been inconsistent with the rest of the picture, and in the second place there would have been no point in Juvenal's reference if it did not suggest some masterpiece familiar to those who would hear or read the poem. Such a work might well be monumental, and conspicuous by reason of its location in a public place; it might be known also through reproductions. Let us suppose then that the Chiron was conceived by the poet as an inexpensive copy of a well-known work, of a

¹ A more natural way to utilize the centaur type as a decorative theme in a table support is illustrated by the example figured in the *Museo Borbonico*, I, Tav. 48.

² See also the seventh edition of the *Sittengeschichte*, II, p. 283.

³ We must regard *sub eodem marmore* as only a more definite expression of the idea of place implied in *infra*.

⁴ The note of the scholiast explaining the abacus as *mensa Delphica*, a round table with three legs, dates apparently from a period when the distinctions recognized in Juvenal's time between the different kinds of tables were already obscured. But notwithstanding the evidence now available (cited *Thes. L. L.*, I, p. 42; Daremberg and Saglio, *Dict. des antiquités*, III, s. v. *mensa* and I, s. v. *abacus*; Pauly-Wissowa, *Real Enc.*, I, p. 5; Marquardt, *Privatleben der Römer*,² pp. 319-320; Saalfeld, *Tensaurus Italograecus*, p. 1; cf. also *C. G. L.*, Index, VI, p. 1; *Jb. Phil. Päd.*, Spplbd. XXII, p. 411, and XXIII, p. 418; Olcott, *Thes. L. L. Ep.*, I, p. 35; De Ruggiero, *Dizionario Ep.*, I, p. 11), our knowledge of the abacus as a type of furniture lacks in preciseness of detail, rendering difficult and often uncertain the identification of the examples represented in works of art and in the remains.

size that made it a suitable companion piece for the diminutive cantharus.

From an oft-cited passage of Pliny the Elder¹ we learn that in the Saepta at Rome there stood two works of sculpture which, though by unknown artists, were of such repute that the custodians instead of the bond or guarantee of money ordinarily exacted were obliged to stake their civil rights or, as some interpret the passage, their lives on the safety of the monuments. One represented Olympus and Pan; the other, Chiron with Achilles. It has been erroneously assumed that the groups were of bronze,² but the context of Pliny's statement leaves no room for doubt that they were of marble.

In the earlier excavations at Herculaneum, in 1739, there were brought to light four paintings which apparently belonged together and were grouped in two pairs; they are now in the Naples Museum.³ The paintings of one pair are slightly larger than those of the other, and the composition is more elaborate; the subjects are Theseus after the killing of the Minotaur, and Hercules witnessing the suckling of the infant Telephus by a hind. The theme of the other two paintings is the same, instruction in music; in the one Marsyas is teaching Olympus the flute, in the other Chiron is showing the young Achilles how to play the lyre. The first pair are evidently free copies, for decorative purposes, of well conceived original paintings. The Marsyas and the Chiron compositions, however, are reproductions of works of sculpture; for although both the satyr and the centaur would ordinarily be represented in a wild or at least an open landscape the background in these two pictures is architectural, and a statuesque character is manifest alike in the grouping and in the outlines of the figures. These

¹ *N. H.* XXXVI, 29.

² So Overbeck, *Geschichte der Griech. Plastik*,⁴ II, p. 423.

³ Helbig, *Wandgemälde*, Nos. 226, 1143, 1214, 1291. The reports of the discovery by Alcubierre, who was in charge of the excavations, are vague in details (Ruggiero, *Storia degli Scavi di Ercolano*, pp. 44, 53, 57, 58), but there is no reason to question the statement of Winckelmann who in his report on the excavations at Herculaneum addressed to Brühl, and written within twenty-five years after the discovery, says that the four paintings came from the inner wall of a round building, thought to be a temple, near the Theatre (*Werke*, II, p. 145).

two paintings were in consequence recognized as representations, more or less free, of the Olympus and Pan, and Chiron with Achilles, in the Saepta at Rome.¹ The statuesque character of the Chiron composition is even more apparent in a variant at Pompeii, where the two figures are shown in a somewhat different relation but are painted to represent a group of

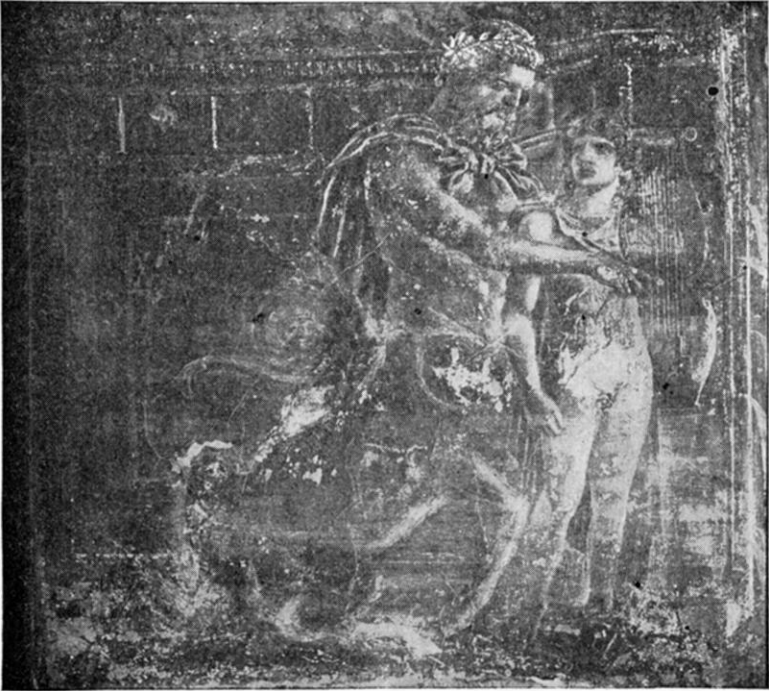


FIGURE 1. — CHIRON AND ACHILLES.

sculpture in marble, on a yellow base;² in still other variants the architectural background has been replaced by a landscape.³

¹ See, for example, the remarks of Finati, in the *Museo Borb.*, text to I, Tav. 7, pp. 4-5 (published in 1824). The vexed question of the relation of the painting with Marsyas and Olympus to the group of Pan and Olympus in the museums at Naples and Florence does not need to be discussed here.

² Helbig, No. 1295. The background in the representations of the group on the shield of Achilles (Helbig, No. 1297; Sogliano, *Pitture Murali Campane*, No. 572) is not clear; cf. Herrmann-Bruckmann, *Denkmäler der Malerei*, Taf. 5; the group is more distinctly shown *Museo Borb.*, IX, Taf. 6.

³ Helbig, Nos. 1292, 1293, 1294.

The painting with Chiron and Achilles is reproduced in our illustration (Fig. 1). The details are not so plainly shown as in the old engravings, yet the main features are clear. Chiron, with a wreath of laurel about his head, with an expression of face both noble and kindly, has passed his left hand behind the shoulders of Achilles in order to hold the lyre, that the attention of the youth may be given wholly to the lesson; with the fingers of the right hand he lightly grasps the plectron. Achilles stands with face turned toward the master's in rapt attention; his right hand hangs by his side. His attitude and expression are happily characterized by Winckelmann, who saw the painting when it was fresher than now; yet, all things considered, it has been remarkably well preserved. "Achilles," says this critic,¹ "stands in an attitude of rest and composure, but in the face there is much suggestiveness; the lineaments give promising indications of the future hero, and in the eyes, which are fixed with earnest attention upon Chiron, we read an impatient desire to receive instruction and bring to an end the course of youthful training that he may make memorable with great deeds the short tale of years allotted to him. On his forehead sits a noble shame, a rebuke of his own backwardness, because the master has taken the plectron from his hand in order to correct his mistakes. He is beautiful in the Aristotelian sense; the sweetness and charm of youth are blended with pride and sensitiveness."

While in the representations of other centaurs the brute nature is made more prominent, in Chiron the human element from the beginning had the ascendancy. This was in accordance with the literary tradition from Homer down; so wise was Chiron, bridger of the gap between man and nature, that he became the teacher and trainer, not only of Achilles, but of a list of heroes so long that it reads like the honor roll of a famous college. In Greek vase-paintings after the early inorganic joining of a human body with human feet to the barrel of a horse's body with a horse's hind feet was abandoned in the case of the other centaurs, in representations of Chiron it was still continued for a considerable time, thus evidencing the

¹ *Werke*, V, pp. 119-120; also, *History of Ancient Art*, translated by G. H. Lodge, II, p. 92.

prominence of the human side in the minds of the designers; "while the general horde of centaurs, both Thessalian and Arcadian, including Pholos himself, have become horses with only the heads and chests of men, Cheiron is a draped philosopher encumbered with half a horse *a tergo*."¹

The Chiron of our painting, as we should expect in the case of a late representation, has a body like that of the other centaurs, but the prominence of the human element in his nature is no less marked; he is the wise and gentle teacher, the instructor of an art. Yet the huge bulk of horse-body is not obscured; instead of being thrown into the background it slopes conspicuously down to the pavement where it is supported by the haunches. The rear of the picture shows a wall, painted yellow, with a cornice divided off by stripes into sections in which rosettes alternate with bucrania. This may possibly be a free rendering of a portion of the Saepta;² that the group mentioned by Pliny is reflected in the painting can hardly be doubted.

Nor can we doubt that in Juvenal's time the mention of Chiron, in such a connection as that of the passage in the third Satire, would suggest the group of Chiron and Achilles, whether it called to mind the masterpiece in the Saepta, or the numerous representations in wall paintings, reliefs and gems.³ We need not be surprised that the poet should designate the group by the name Chiron alone, instead of Chiron and Achilles; Juvenal wastes no words, and it would be natural to call such a work after the dominant figure, just as we speak of the "Farnese Bull." Thus Martial, consistently with what we may believe to have been current usage, designates the group of Chiron and Achilles in the Saepta by another name for Chiron, Phillyrides.⁴ In speaking of the Saepta, Juvenal uses not this word but the old-fashioned *ovile*, "sheepfold."⁵

¹ Colvin, *Centaur in Greek Vase-Paintings*, *J.H.S.*, I, p. 137.

² For the architectural character of the Saepta cf. Huelsen, 'I Saepta ed il Diribitorio,' *B. Com. Rom.*, 1893, pp. 137 ff.; Jordan's *Top. der Stadt Rom*, I, pt. iii, pp. 560 ff.

³ Kroker, *Ann. dell' Inst.*, 1884, pp. 63-64; since 1884 the list of reproductions has been considerably augmented, particularly those on gems.

⁴ Ep. II, 14, 6. The emendation suggested by Lucas (*Wien Stud.* XXII, pp. 315-317: *Aeacides* instead of *Aesonides*) is quite unnecessary.

⁵ VI., 529.

Assuming that the Chiron of Juvenal is a diminutive copy of the group in the Saepta, we see that the shape of the figure of the centaur, more prominent in front and sloping back toward the rear, and the pose of the Achilles, made it especially suitable for display on a shelf or base under the marble top of the abacus. Moreover *recubans*, humorously applied to the posture of the horse-body, with this interpretation becomes not only intelligible but characteristically Juvenalian.¹ Finally no subject would be more in keeping with the surroundings of a man of poetic tastes than that of instruction by Chiron, guardian of the secrets of nature, teacher of music, the beneficent.

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¹ The comment of the scholiast — *RECUBANS: enim et a posteriore parte recumbens*. [*CHIRON*]: *ippocentaurus* — seems of early origin, dating from a time when Juvenal's reference was correctly interpreted. The awkwardness of expression in the first part is perhaps due to corruption of the text; Schultz (*Hermes*, XXIV, p. 491) proposes *est* in place of *et*.